

Political Reviews

The Region in Review: International Issues and Events, 2008

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Melanesia in Review: Issues and Events, 2008

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Throughout 2008, Pacific regionalism was buffeted by a series of crises. Regional unity was stressed by administrative, budgetary, and leadership problems in intergovernmental agencies; by tensions between Pacific Islands Forum member countries over climate change and trade; and by unresolved debate over the relationship between the Forum and Fiji, after the 2006 coup led by Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama.

At the same time, elections in Australia (November 2007), New Zealand (November 2008), and the United States (November 2008) have transformed the regional landscape, as the incoming governments push new policies on development assistance, climate, and regional engagement.

In less than a year, the incoming Australian government led by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd improved the atmospherics of Australia's engagement with the Pacific Islands. By the end of the conservative government of former Prime Minister John Howard (1996–2007), relations with key Pacific governments were in tatters. Relations with Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands were soured by the pursuit by Australian officials of Julian Moti (an Australian lawyer who was advisor and subsequently attorney general for Solomon's Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare) over alleged criminal offenses. Australian ministerial contact with Papua New Guinea was banned after Prime Minister Michael Somare authorized

the use of a PNG military flight to transport Moti to Solomon Islands to avoid Moti's extradition to Australia. Fiji's interim administration was angry over "smart sanctions" introduced by Australia and New Zealand, and John Howard's refusal to act on global warming dismayed the small island states that are already suffering adverse climate impacts.

In 2008, regular diplomatic visits by new Foreign Minister Stephen Smith and parliamentary secretaries Bob McMullan (for aid) and Duncan Kerr (for Pacific Island affairs) have reinforced key policy decisions by the Rudd government. These changes—some symbolic, some substantial—have changed the mood in the region: the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol; the Stolen Generations apology; closing the Pacific Solution detention center in Nauru; promises of increased aid, A\$150 million in climate adaptation funds; and a new A\$200 million Pacific Region Infrastructure Facility (PRIF).

Following years of lobbying, Pacific governments also welcomed Australian and New Zealand programs to open their labor markets to unskilled workers from the Pacific. New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) program for seasonal workers brings nearly 5,000 Islanders a year to pick fruit in orchards and vineyards around the country. The August announcement of a pilot study for an Australian seasonal workers program means 2,500 Pacific workers will come

to Australia over the next three years to work in horticulture and fruit picking (Maclellan 2008).

Relations with Port Moresby have improved, with a major joint ministerial meeting in March and the inclusion of Papua New Guinea in Australia's new seasonal workers scheme. At the August 2008 Forum leaders meeting in Niue, Prime Ministers Rudd and Somare signed the first of a series of "Pacific Partnerships for Development"—bilateral agreements that Australia will negotiate over the next year with all Forum island countries. By January 2009, these bilateral agreements had been finalized with Papua New Guinea, Sāmoa, Kiribati, and Solomon Islands.

The New Zealand elections saw the defeat of the Labour Party government led by Prime Minister Helen Clark, and the election of a coalition government under National Party Prime Minister John Key. The Māori Party, winning five seats, has taken up ministerial posts in the National-led government with Dr Pita Sharples as minister of Māori affairs and associate minister for health and corrections, and Mrs Tariana Turia as minister for the community and voluntary sector, associate minister of health, and associate minister for social development and employment.

Incoming Foreign Minister Murray McCully stated that the New Zealand government would increase its focus on aid and trade with the Pacific, and "saw a much higher level of engagement with the Pacific nations" (Wilson 2008, 16). New Minister for Pacific Islands Affairs Georgina Te Heuheu stated that the government would consider expanding New Zealand's

RSE seasonal worker program (Wilson 2008, 15).

While maintaining its longstanding ties to Polynesia, New Zealand has increased economic and trade links with Melanesian countries, with trade increasing from NZ\$385 million in 1987 to NZ\$600 million in 2008. New Zealand will join Australia to press for greater trade liberalization in the islands region (discussed below).

In the United States, the November election of Barack Obama as president and the swing to the Democratic Party in the US House and Senate opened the way for a shift in focus toward the Islands region.

For many years under the Bush administration, the United States maintained a policy of benign neglect toward the Island states of the southwest Pacific, while expanding its strategic role in the north Pacific with missile testing at Kwajalein Atoll and increased military deployments in Guam. While the Obama administration will continue to focus on major challenges including the domestic economic crisis and relations with Russia, China, and the Middle East, there will be policy shifts on issues like climate change that may benefit the Islands region.

The election of an African-American to the White House sparked a wave of support and interest in the Pacific Islands as elsewhere around the world. University of the South Pacific academic Som Prakash noted that the election was closely monitored in the Pacific: "There was a high level of interest because Obama is a black man. Pacific Islanders identified with him and wanted to see him succeed" (Singh 2008).

The relocation of US Marines from Okinawa to Guam, involving 8,000 troops and about 9,000 of their dependents over the next ten years, will impact on regional relations far beyond the local impact on the Chamorro people of Guam. In May 2008, the Government of Guam, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) signed a letter of understanding to determine how Pacific Island countries can benefit from the military relocation—a program costing over US\$15 billion. Forum Deputy Secretary-General Peter Forau noted: “The US is seeking 10,000 workers from the Pacific to help Guam prepare for the relocation. The initial discussions with the Guam authorities have led to an understanding for a quota of 10,000 for the Pacific” (Baselala 2008).

The Obama administration’s potential engagement in global climate negotiations has also raised hopes in a region facing serious impacts from global warming. In the first telephone conversation between Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and President Obama after the US president’s inauguration, both leaders pledged closer cooperation on climate change and discussed the need to work together in preparing for the next major UN conference on climate change, to be held in Copenhagen in December 2009 (AAP, 28 Jan 2009).

Under the principles of the 2000 Biketawa Declaration, Pacific Islands Forum member countries continued to intervene in Island states, but improved relations with Nauru and Solomon Islands were overshadowed by the ongoing crisis in Fiji.

After the 2007 Forum RAMSI Review Task Force Report and the

elections of the Sikua government in Honiara and the Rudd government in Australia, regional relations with the Solomon Islands rapidly improved. While the intervention was largely driven by Australian interests (Oxfam 2006, 20–22), in 2008 Forum member governments and the Sikua administration moved to strengthen and also more clearly define the role of Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

During 2008, meetings of the Enhanced Consultative Mechanism (ECM) and the Forum Ministerial Standing Committee (FMSC) have been developing the proposed “Solomon Islands Government—RAMSI Partnership Framework” and jointly agreed development strategies and objectives (Forum Secretariat 2008a). Under the legislation establishing RAMSI, the Office of the Special Coordinator must be headed by an Australian official from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. But Forum Island countries have been seeking greater input and have agreed to appoint a Forum representative to Solomon Islands.

The Forum has also continued the Pacific Regional Assistance to Nauru (PRAN), sending a monitoring mission for Nauru’s April 2008 election.

The biggest regional issue in 2008, however, was relations with the post-coup interim administration in Fiji. Debate over the role of the military and a return to parliamentary rule will be a headache for some time to come, with Fiji facing possible suspension from the Forum because of the delay in holding elections. During the year, the commander of the Fiji Military Forces, Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama (who also serves as prime

minister and home affairs minister in the interim administration), repeatedly made clear his belief that elections can only be held when issues of corruption, electoral reform, and community harmony are resolved—claims that are widely critiqued both within and outside Fiji.

The 2007 Forum established a Forum-Fiji Working Group with senior officials from Australia, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and Tuvalu. The working group met regularly with Fijian officials in 2008 to discuss the election timetable and a series of outstanding issues: the restoration of civilian rule, upholding the 1997 Constitution, the cessation of human rights abuses and addressing allegations of abuse, and support for a credible and independent anti-corruption commission. But members of the interim administration stressed that elections would be held only after reforms to the communal voting system, the completion of the “People’s Charter” process, and a subsequent President’s Political Dialogue Forum (PPDF). In June, the process faltered after a letter from Interim Prime Minister Bainimarama to then Forum Chair Prime Minister Feleti Sevele of Tonga advised that Fiji would no longer participate in the working group meetings.

The officials’ meetings were supplemented by a higher level “Forum Ministerial Contact Group on Fiji” made up of ministers from Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Sāmoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu. The ministerial contact group, created at a Forum Foreign Affairs Ministers’ meeting in Auckland in March, was designed “to further monitor the progress of Fiji’s

preparations for the election and the return to democracy” (Forum Secretariat 2008b). The contact group met with the interim administration in July and December, but the meetings were largely unproductive—the diplomatic communiqué after the July meeting described the talks as “frank and informative” (Forum Secretariat 2008c). The sniping in both directions continued, with the Fiji military reneging on past commitments, and Australia and New Zealand enforcing visa bans on members of the interim Fiji administration. Diplomatic solutions were not helped by Helen Clark’s comparison of Commodore Bainimarama with Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe in the lead-up to the Niue Forum.

After attending the 2007 Forum in Nuku‘alofa and pledging to hold elections by March 2009, Bainimarama started to snub regional leaders meetings. He declined to attend the August 2008 Forum leaders meeting in Niue, citing New Zealand’s refusal to allow Fijian officials to meet in Auckland with donor countries after the Niue meeting. Bainimarama also claimed that his promise of elections by March 2009 had been “forced”—a statement sharply denied by the outgoing Forum chair, Tongan Prime Minister Feleti Sevele: “Unfortunately, the Forum’s relationship with the interim government of Fiji has now deteriorated from the apparent, promising situation at the Forum last year in Tonga, to one of disappointment and of an uncertain future. As Forum Leaders, we are all extremely disappointed at the interim Prime Minister’s decision not to attend this Forum meeting” (Forum Secretariat 2008e).

Bainimarama also refused to attend the special Forum leaders meeting in

Port Moresby in January 2009, citing responsibilities at home with the natural disaster in Fiji (discussed below). The interim administration also sent a shot across the bows of the Forum by expelling the Australian publisher of the *Fiji Times*, Rex Gardner, just before the January meeting and days before he was due to end his current work permit. This reinforced previous deportations of two Australian publishers, Russell Hunter of the *Fiji Sun* in February and Evan Hannah of the *Fiji Times* in May 2008. These actions and other restrictions on the media drew protests from media organizations across the region, with Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) President Joseph Ealedona stating: "Fiji's Interim Prime Minister Commodore Frank Bainimarama continues to ignore his promise of upholding media freedom. The blatant attack on the Fourth Estate chips away at the tenets of freedom of the media in Fiji and will hinder every effort to return the country to normalcy" (PINA 2009).

At a special regional meeting in January 2009, Forum leaders agreed that Fiji may face suspension from the regional organization if, by May 2009, it does not announce a date for elections before the end of the year.

The potential suspension of a founding member of the Forum is unique in the organization's thirty-eight-year history, and raises significant issues. Island leaders have stressed the need to maintain dialogue rather than confrontation, but by the end of 2008 it was clear that Commodore Bainimarama's mercurial actions were frustrating even the most committed supporters of the Pacific Way. Support from Melanesian Spearhead Group

leaders like Papua New Guinea's Michael Somare continued, but some Polynesian leaders (especially Sāmoa's Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi and Tonga's Feleti Sevele) were publicly critical of the Fiji military's actions. Fiji's role as host of the Forum Secretariat, the presence of other regional institutions in Suva, and Nadi's position as a transport hub and transit point for small island states like Tuvalu and Kiribati all complicate the diplomatic pressure that can be applied.

Throughout 2008, major donors to Fiji like Australia, New Zealand, the European Union, and the United States have been pushing hard for change, refusing to increase nonhumanitarian aid, and maintaining travel sanctions on Fijian officials and interim ministers and their families. Fiji's economy is reliant on aid, trade, remittances, and tourism from these countries, and suspension would lead to ongoing sanctions and a heavy economic toll.

However, Fiji's Military Council had not been rattled by previous Australian and New Zealand saber rattling (best symbolized by the three Australian warships off the coast of Fiji in the lead-up to the December 2006 coup). During his visit to Beijing at the time of the 2008 Olympics, Bainimarama discussed Chinese aid and loans as well as the Olympic results. International pressure on the regime will be significant, but changes in Fiji are more likely to be determined by what is happening inside the country, following the August resignation of three Fiji Labour Party ministers from the interim administration—including Interim Finance Minister and former Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry.

Fiji was not the Forum's only headache. While work continued implementing the "Pacific Plan for Strengthening Regional Cooperation and Integration," the Pacific Islands Forum and other members of the Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP) faced significant problems during 2008.

Forum officials had to deal with a crunch affecting the long-term sustainable funding of the Forum Secretariat, which has a budget of nearly F\$30 million. In July, acting Forum Secretary-General Feleti Teo expressed concern about "the continuation of the presently unsustainable situation that the Secretariat faces with respect to member contributions not keeping pace with rising costs" (Forum Secretariat 2008d). Forum officials developed a new PIFS Corporate Plan 2008–2012 to cut the previous nine programs into four more focused and strategic programs: economic governance; political governance and security; corporate services; and the regional coordination role of the Secretariat.

The budgetary problems highlighted the dilemma that Forum Island countries contribute a relatively small part of the Secretariat's working budget, while overseas donors contribute significant resources for programs, staffing, and travel—with the risk that donor agendas can overshadow Island priorities.

The Forum was rocked by the August 2008 death of Secretary-General Greg Urwin. Following ill health, Urwin withdrew from active service, then formally announced his retirement in July, but passed away the following month. On his appointment

to the post, Urwin had been charged by Forum leaders with making the Pacific Plan a reality. His appointment in 2004 had been greeted with some concern, as it was seen as a significant Australian intervention in Forum affairs since the secretary-general's position had historically been held by an Islander. But the news of Urwin's passing was marked with plaudits from around the Pacific, acknowledging his commitment to the Pacific Islands during a long career as a diplomat, development worker, and friend of the region.

There were three nominees to replace Urwin at the Forum Secretariat: Tuiloma Neroni Slade of Sāmoa, Feleti Teo of Tuvalu, and Wilkie Rasmussen of the Cook Islands. Forum leaders appointed Tuiloma Neroni Slade as the new secretary-general at their thirty-ninth meeting in Niue in August. A former attorney general of Sāmoa, Neroni Slade has had a long career on the international stage, as senior legal adviser at the Commonwealth Secretariat, as Sāmoa's ambassador to the United Nations, and most recently as a judge in the International Criminal Court. As former chair of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), he has vital international networks that will aid Pacific countries as they move toward the December 2009 climate negotiations in Copenhagen.

Other CROP agencies also faced leadership and budgetary issues throughout the year. The University of the South Pacific (USP) faced significant financial cutbacks. The USP Senate and Council abolished ninety-eight courses in 2008, with cuts to staffing mooted at the end of the year. Ongoing discussions over the merger

of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) and the Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC) were unresolved. This was highlighted in media coverage of the leadership of the two agencies, as SOPAC Director Cristelle Pratt was offered the SPREP directorship when the outgoing director—the Federated States of Micronesia’s Asterio Takesy—ended his term. By year’s end, Pratt decided to stay with SOPAC rather than move to leadership of the Apia-based regional environment agency (*Islands Business* 2009).

The issue of leadership will continue to haunt the intergovernmental organizations. At the Forum leaders meeting in Niue, Australia and New Zealand argued that the deputy secretary-general’s position should be held by an Australian or New Zealand citizen. This push reaffirmed concern among some members about heavy-handed influence from the two largest members of the Forum. With Australia hosting the Forum leaders in August 2009 (for the first time in fifteen years), tensions will likely continue over the role of Australia and New Zealand.

In recent years, Pacific Island countries have increasingly focused on trade liberalization as a central pillar of efforts to promote regional integration and cooperation. The growing debate over “free trade” in the Islands region has been framed by principles from the World Trade Organization (WTO). Negotiation of regional free trade agreements was supposed to follow the completion of the WTO’s Doha Development Round (multilateral trade negotiations that began in 2001). But by 2008, global differences—especially on reducing

barriers to agricultural trade and trade in services—had led to the collapse of the Doha negotiations, and the trade agenda in the Pacific is largely being played out through regional pacts such as the Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement (PICTA), the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER), PACER-Plus, and the European Union (EU)–African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA).

Throughout 2008, negotiations continued over finalizing the regional Economic Partnership Agreement with the European Union. Even though economic partnership agreements in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific were supposed to be finalized by December 2007, most were still not completed at the end of 2008. At the ACP Assembly in Port Moresby in November 2008, ACP Secretary-General Sir John Kaputin of Papua New Guinea expressed disquiet at the process so far: “Heads of State were concerned that undue pressure was being put on some ACP States to move forward to signing and ratification of the EPAs before legitimate concerns were adequately addressed in a way that creates conditions for all ACP States to become part of Agreements that genuinely contribute to growth, development and the advancement of regional integration. ACP has negotiated in good faith based on political expression at the highest level in the EU [; however] it is when we get to the negotiation table that we realize that there is a great gulf between the rhetoric and actual practice” (ACP 2008).

Trade justice groups like the Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG) have joined Pacific governments to

raise concern about the EPA negotiations. PANG argued that rhetoric about “sustainable development” is not evident in negotiating drafts put forward by EU trade negotiators, who have rejected proposals advanced by Pacific governments to address their specific needs (PANG 2008). The European Union has tried to use the EPA process to open the way for European corporations to access the services sector and to introduce provisions through the regional economic partnership agreements—on services, intellectual property rights, government procurement, and investment—that were rebuffed in the multilateral Doha negotiations by larger developing countries such as Brazil, South Africa, and India.

The Pacific ACP States have reaffirmed their commitment to continue the negotiations of an economic partnership agreement “as a single region” based on existing negotiating positions (Forum Secretariat 2008f). But there are cracks in the regional unity over trade. Under pressure because of potential job losses in the sugar and tuna export industries if they did not concede, the Pacific’s largest countries, Fiji and Papua New Guinea, split ranks with other Pacific nations to sign an interim deal on trade-in-goods with the European Union at the end of 2007. The Interim Partnership Agreement allows for 100 percent liberalization by value by the European Union as of 1 January 2008, with transition periods for rice and sugar. It allows for 88 percent liberalization by value by Papua New Guinea and 80 percent liberalization by Fiji over a time period of fifteen years (European Commission 2007).

In policy statements from Australia and New Zealand, increased trade and “open economies” are also presented as a way to address the lack of economic growth and social development in Island nations. Australia’s incoming parliamentary secretary for Pacific Islands affairs, Duncan Kerr, argued in April: “Trade is good. Open markets do matter. In the long term, it is trade more than development assistance that will reduce poverty. Open trade opens doors. Making trade easier and removing excessive regulations can have enormous benefits. . . . More trade will result in economic growth in the Pacific and for its people. It will reduce dependency and lead to more prosperity and sustainability” (Kerr 2008).

The Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER), signed by most Forum members in 2001, will now be extended into a free trade agreement dubbed PACER-Plus. Following the Pacific ACP Trade Ministers meeting in Nadi in April 2008, the Forum Secretariat has been mandated to carry out a study on the idea of a Pacific Single Market and Economy (PSME). Meeting with then New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark en route to the Niue Forum, Kevin Rudd stated, “I want to see us working more closely together bilaterally, driving towards the single economic market” (Rudd 2008).

Even as regional negotiators are stretched over the EPA negotiations, Australian and New Zealand officials want to start moving on PACER-Plus, under pressure from corporate interests that see European companies moving in sectors that have long been dominated by the Oceanic powers. The push for PACER-Plus negotiations

has met resistance from some Pacific governments who are wary of the social and economic impacts of full regional economic integration (Nathan Associates 2007). Some Pacific analysts have raised eyebrows at Australia's training of Island officials as trade negotiators, so they can negotiate the free trade deal with Australia (PANG 2008). Island governments are pushing for the early appointment of a chief trade adviser to look at alternative options for trade and development (because of Australia and New Zealand's Forum membership, the Forum Secretariat will not be able to play the same role as a focal point for advice and support on PACER as it did in the EPA negotiations).

But the push for increased trade liberalization, structural adjustment, and public sector reform is raising concern among Pacific nongovernmental organizations, churches, and trade unions. Civil society organizations are beginning to question the impacts on indigenous land, resource owners, and poorer sections of the community. Pacific civil society organizations are coordinating regionally to develop a coherent critique of the new free trade agenda. An August civil society forum issued a statement on trade justice, stressing: "Pacific NGOs, churches and trade unions working on trade justice issues are concerned about the push for free trade agreements in the Pacific and the grave risk that these agreements pose for our people. . . . The hard line approach taken by the European Commission on behalf of the European Union, and signals that Australia and New Zealand are likely to take a similar approach in putting their own economic and business interests ahead of the development

aspirations of the people of the Pacific, in the view of Pacific NGOs, Churches and Trade Unions, is in direct violation of the principles of good governance. Such inequitable trade agreements pose grave risks for our people and future generations" (CSO Forum 2008).

In a year of fluctuating prices for food and oil, small island developing states in the Pacific faced renewed problems from climatic change and natural disaster. Lying just a few meters above sea level, atoll nations in the Pacific are particularly vulnerable to even small changes in global climatic patterns. The threat of major sea-level rise in coming years means that small island developing states are on the front lines when it comes to being affected by global climate change.

With natural weather variability, countries already face severe economic losses from extreme weather events like storm surges, cyclones, and king tides. Predicted increases in sea-level rise and the intensity of natural disasters like cyclones will exacerbate existing problems.

In late 2008 and early 2009, there were a series of flooding events around the region that brought home the impact of these changing climatic conditions. Annual king tides combined with storm surges and heavy rain from tropical depressions to flood coastal areas in several island nations:

- In Papua New Guinea, the government allocated K50 million in relief and recovery funds following massive sea swells in December 2008. (At that time, the PNG kina was the equivalent of US\$.40.) More than 38,000 peo-

- ple were affected by flooding and over 2,000 houses were destroyed or damaged in provinces along the northern New Guinea coast (including West Sepik, East Sepik, Madang, and Morobe) and Islands region (New Ireland, Manus, and the Autonomous Region of Bougainville).
- In the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia, a state of emergency was declared as widespread flooding displaced hundreds of people in December. A combination of three-meter waves and heavy storms flooded Majuro and Ebeye in the Marshall Islands, and the US Federal Emergency Management Agency and Australia sent emergency supplies to assist with disaster recovery.
 - In Fiji, people fled to higher ground as torrential rains caused flash flooding in January 2009, killing eight people and displacing thousands, with direct effects on more than 116,328 people in Viti Levu's Western Division and 30,667 people in the Central Division. Fiji's interim administration declared a state of emergency and imposed curfews to stop looting, as Interim Prime Minister Bainimarama said the flooding was considered "the worst ever in Fiji's history" (Interim Government of Fiji 2009). As well as damage to food supplies and the sugar crop, the floods disrupted international tourism. The government's tally of damage in the Fiji floods, running to tens of millions of dollars, highlights the threat to developing countries from increased weather events and natural disasters.
 - By February 2009, Solomon Islands declared a national disaster when eight people died and another thirteen went missing after flooding and torrential rain damaged homes and bridges on the main island of Guadalcanal. Flooding on Guadalcanal and Savo Island led to the evacuation of more than seventy villagers to Honiara, with the Red Cross, Australia, and France providing emergency aid.
- Such cyclones, storm surges, and heavy rains particularly impact low-lying agricultural land. As FSM President Emanuel Mori told the UN General Assembly in September: "The nexus between food security and climate change cannot be overlooked. In Micronesia, the farmlands and the inhabitants occupy the low-lying fringes and islands barely a few meters above sea level. Taro patches which provide the main staple of our people for centuries are now under threat by sea-level rise. Already, many islands have experienced inundations of their taro patches and other food crops by salt water, resulting in decreased crop production" (Mori 2008).
- In response, government leaders have increased their diplomatic efforts at regional and international levels, in economies already buffeted by rising prices for kerosene and imported foods. At the August 2008 Forum meeting in Niue, Forum leaders endorsed "The Niue Declaration on Climate Change."
- The annual meeting of Pacific Forum Economic Ministers, held in October in Port Vila, Vanuatu, focused

especially on food and energy security in the region. Regional energy experts met in Auckland, New Zealand, that same month to continue planning for regional bulk procurement of petroleum by Pacific Island countries, in an attempt to offset damage to Island economies from fluctuating global oil prices.

Countries like Kiribati, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu, which hold Least Developed Country (LDC) status at the United Nations, used the opening of the 2008 UN General Assembly in September to argue for the recognition of the vulnerability criterion as the paramount criterion for determining LDC status. Pacific governments, working through the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) were forthright on the need for greater support from developed countries for adaptation funding to cope with the increased impacts of global warming. Speaking to the UN General Assembly in September, Tuvalu Prime Minister Apisai Ielemia stated: "It is very clear that financial resources for adaptation are completely inadequate. Last year Oxfam International suggested that the adaptation needs of developing countries will cost a minimum of US\$50 billion per year. . . . We believe new and additional sources of funding must be identified and channeled through the recently established Adaptation Fund to help fund concrete adaptation projects in-country to adapt to the impacts of climate change, while ensuring long term survival and livelihoods in our God-given lands" (Ielemia 2008a)

Leaders of low-lying atoll nations in the Pacific also spoke out on climate change at the December 2008 conference of parties to the UN Framework

Convention on Climate Change in Poznan, Poland, calling on industrialized nations to act on "the greatest challenge that humanity has ever known." Prime Minister Ielemia was equally forthright at the conference. In a speech to the conference plenary, he argued that there is a need for easier access to the proposed Adaptation Fund, which will provide resources to developing countries for adaptation programs: "[Small Island Developing States] like Tuvalu need direct access and expeditious disbursement of funding for real adaptation urgently because we are suffering already from the effects of climate change. How else can we say it more clearly! It seems however that some key industrialized states are trying to make the Adaptation Fund inaccessible to those most in need. I am compelled to say we are deeply disappointed with the manner some of our partners are burying us in red tape. This is totally unacceptable" (Ielemia 2008b).

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